

# *Maxillaria lehmannii* and its namesake

PASCAL SAUVÊTRE describes  
the life of one of the great  
plant collectors and the orchid  
that was named after him



A flower of *Maxillaria lehmannii*  
with a sepal and petal removed,  
showing the colourful lip

THE HISTORY of orchids is largely the story of those who discovered them and grew them. One of the best examples of this is Friedrich Carl Lehmann. Sent by the German government to search for plants in the New World, he spent more than half his life travelling around tropical America. Later, he worked mainly for English companies and settled in Colombia. He became the German Consul General and was also a landowner, a mining engineer and a plant hunter. Lehmann was one of the greatest plant collectors in this part of the tropics at the end of the 19th century. Heinrich Gustav Reichenbach dedicated many orchids to him, including the beautiful *Maxillaria lehmannii*.



**FC Lehmann**  
 portrait from *The Orchid Review*  
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## On his first expedition he collected many plants, including *Maxillaria lehmannii*

celebrated at the time and greatly admired by lovers of curious plants, was *Anthurium andreanum*. He found this magnificent aroid in May 1876, in the province of Cauca in Colombia (then known as New Grenada). Only 40 plants were sent to France. In the same year, Lehmann was sent by the German government to study the floral diversity of the New World and in particular, to send the most worthwhile plants to Europe. Thanks to two local people who accompanied him, he rediscovered André's collecting site and later, in 1880, he sent roots of *Anthurium andreanum* to Britain.

Lehmann visited Ecuador in 1876 and travelled through the regions of Loja, Cuenca, Quito and Guayaquil. He then returned to southwest

Colombia and arrived at Tumaco, an important port on the Pacific coast. After that, he turned towards Pasto, then to the forests of Putumayo and the Sibundoy valley. On this first expedition he collected many tropical plants, including orchids such as *Maxillaria lehmannii*, as well as birds and minerals. After this, he made frequent voyages between tropical America and Europe – a total of 24 crossings in 27 years. He also travelled through Guatemala and Costa Rica.

### New species Lehmann found

Lehmann's contribution to science is immense. He sent specimens to lots of European museums, including the Natural History Museum in London, which bought some of his herbarium and drawings. He sent a multitude of new species of orchid to Kraenzlin in Berlin, to Reichenbach in Hamburg and some to David Moore at Glasnevin Botanic Garden, Dublin. His collections of *Aristolochiaceae*, bromeliads and passion flowers are equally famous.

He discovered many species of *Masdevallia* and introduced some of the finest ones to Europe. In 1880, he went to collect the beautiful *M. rosea*, which Hartweg had found previously, near Loja in Ecuador. He gathered a few plants but the boat (the *Para*) that was carrying them was shipwrecked near the Azores. Lehmann, risking his life, managed to save some plants, which he later brought back to England. Surprisingly, he did not work much with German colleagues (only Haupt is mentioned) but supplied mainly growers and collectors in England, such as Hugh Low, Frederick Sander and Sir Trevor Lawrence. Although he specialised in the genus *Masdevallia*, other genera were not neglected. Among the scores of new species he collected were *Catasetum lehmannii*, *Lepanthes lehmannii*, *Masdevallia lehmannii*, *Pescatoria lehmannii*, *Restrepia trichoglossa* and *Sievekingia* ➤

### A Prussian boyhood

Friedrich Carl Lehmann Goldschmidt was born on 27 December 1850, either in the town of Werder, southwest of Berlin, or in Platkow, east of Berlin. Both these towns were in the province of Brandenburg, in the kingdom of Prussia. His family was said to be of modest origin and his education was basic, so he must have been remarkably gifted, hard working and persevering to have risen in Prussian society and become a mining engineer. The botanist Friedrich Kraenzlin, who knew him slightly, spoke of him as follows, 'His accomplishments, his acquaintance with several languages, his botanical knowledge and his skill as a draughtsman – all these he acquired by his own indomitable energy and perseverance.' We know nothing more of his life until, aged 26, he left for South America in 1876.

### On the track of Edouard André

Edouard André (1840–1911), a French botanist and landscape artist, lived for many years in tropical America and sent back numerous novelties for European horticulture. One of his discoveries,

*Maxillaria lehmannii*



*Maxillaria lehmannii* seems to grow only in the Andes in Ecuador and Colombia

*suavis*. He found a number of species of *Maxillaria*, including *M. augustae-victoriae*, *M. fractiflexa*, *M. grandis*, *M. jucunda*, *M. lehmannii*, *M. urbaniana* and *M. vulcanica*.

### Life in Colombia

After his return from Europe in 1885, he made the acquaintance of Doña María Josefa Mosquera y Epalza in the Colombian town of Santa Marta. This cultured lady belonged to one of the oldest land-owning families (*latifundistas*) in the country. They were married a year later and henceforth he called himself Federico Carlos Lehmann. He and his wife settled in the property La Capilla in Popayán, in the province of Cauca in the southwest of Colombia. It was a vast hacienda where they grew crops and reared cattle; later, gold was found there. They had four children. Lehmann, as well as being a land-owner and gold prospector, continued his interest in natural history and visited most parts of the country. Mrs Lehmann was a skilful watercolour painter and illustrated some of his new discoveries.

Now settled in Colombia, he was appointed as German Consul-General by Emperor William II, to look after the interests of German and Swiss nationals. This new responsibility was no sinecure. The region suffered numerous disturbances following the break-up of 'Grande-Colombie' into three independent nations: Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela. The emergence in Colombia of two fiercely opposed political parties, the conservative centralists and the liberal federalists, led to many insurrections and civil wars. The bloodiest of these was the War of a Thousand Days (*Guerra de los Mil Días*), 1899–1902, which caused the death of more than 100,000 Colombians. During this period Lehmann had to manage his estates and carry out his diplomatic duties in a permanent climate of violence.

## A tragic death

Lehmann died while crossing the River Timbiquí in a small boat on 23 November 1903. The circumstances are not at all clear; there are two different versions of what happened. In one, it was a simple accident and he drowned; in the other, he was attacked by bandits determined to steal the gold he was carrying. What is certain is that his death happened unexpectedly while he was on his way to make a tour of inspection of the gold mine at Timbiquí, on the Pacific coast of Cauca province.

The news of his death was a great sensation and many tributes were published in European horticultural journals such as *Gardeners' Chronicle* and *Revue Horticole*. This indefatigable plant hunter was already recognised in his life-time; the genus *Lehmanniella* in the *Gentianaceae* was named in his honour in 1895 by the German botanist Ernest Gilg and innumerable genera include a species dedicated to Lehmann.

After Lehmann's death, Robert Rolfe, on behalf of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, offered to buy Lehmann's entire herbarium, drawings and notes from his widow. After tough negotiations (Mrs Lehmann asked for £2,500 but only got £200), RBG Kew received from Popayán 7,200 herbarium sheets of a range of plants, 3,172 herbarium sheets of orchids, 500 drawings and all his notes on habitat.

Some duplicates were sold to other botanic gardens or herbaria such as New York Botanical Garden and the Oakes Ames Orchid Herbarium.

Lehmann's grandson, Federico Carlos Lehmann Valencia (1914–1974) became a renowned Colombian naturalist. He was an ornithologist and herpetologist and founded the Museums of Natural History in Cali and Popayán.

The Cuenca region  
in Ecuador



## *Maxillaria lehmannii*

Lehmann found this magnificent species in April 1876 on the western slopes of the Andes at an altitude of 1,800–2,000m, near Molleturo, 52km northeast of Cuenca, Azuay province, in Ecuador. He collected it again in May of the same year at about 2,000m near Tambo Loma, 8km west of Molleturo.

Reichenbach described *Maxillaria lehmannii* in 1878 in *Otia Botanica Hamburgensis*, dedicating it to its discoverer. There is an attractive ink and watercolour drawing of the species in his herbarium, which is now in the Natural History Museum of Vienna, Austria. Many plants of *Maxillaria lehmannii* were imported into Europe, particularly after Reichenbach wrote about it again in the *Gardeners' Chronicle*, where he described another specimen sent by W Bull. He wrote, 'It is a very stately thing, far superior to *Maxillaria grandiflora*...'

The French horticulturist Alexandre Godefroy-Lebeuf, in his journal *L'Orchidophile* in 1886, gives just as good an account of the species as Reichenbach, 'I regard this plant as being worthy of recommendation

to all those who know that Orchids comprise more than Cattleyas and Laelias, Odontoglossums and Masdevallias.' Godefroy-Lebeuf bought orchids from the British nursery Hugh Low & Co and, from 1883, he offered imported plants to French collectors for 200 francs each – equivalent now to about £600.

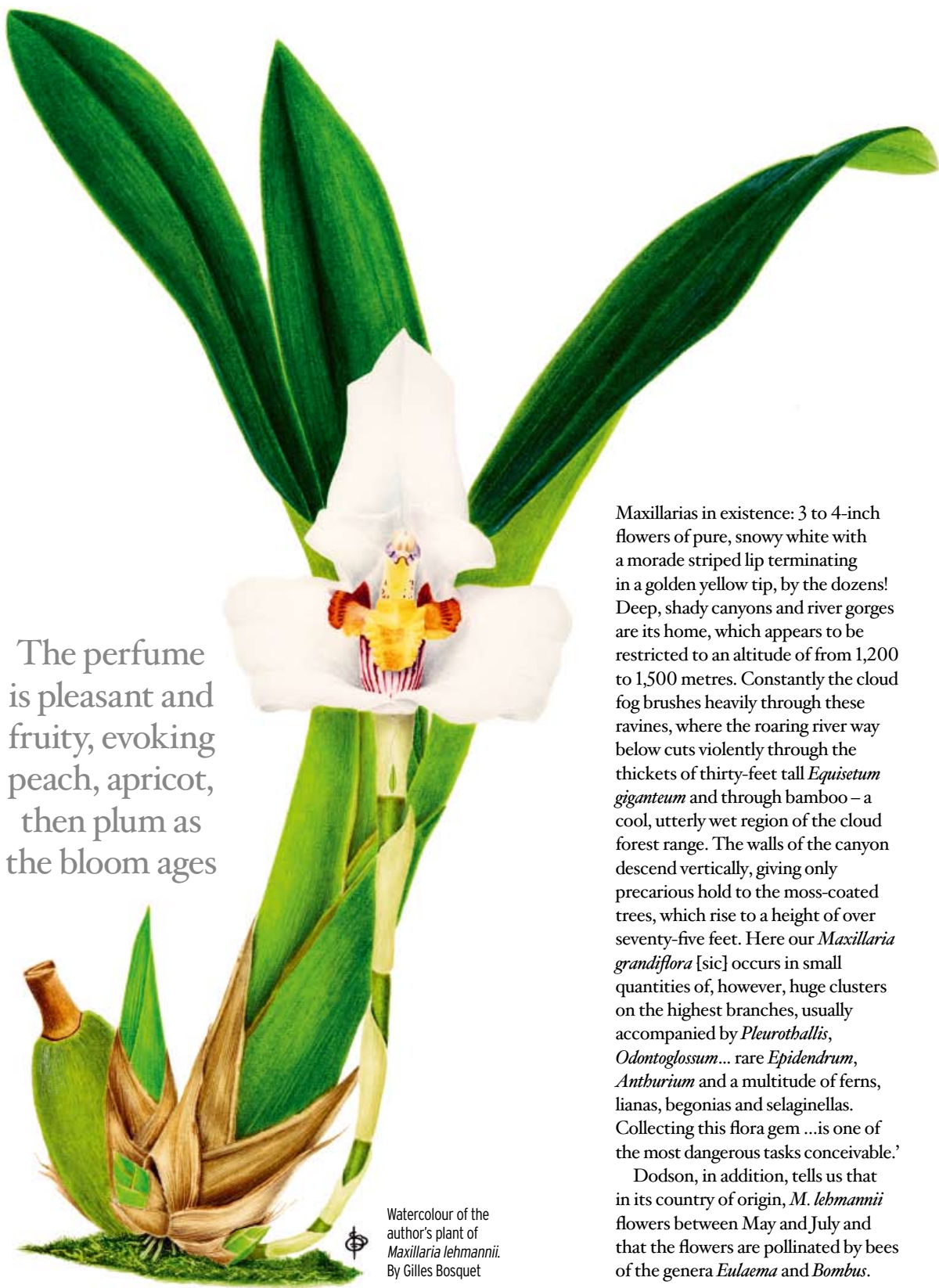
## In the wild

Little information is available about *Maxillaria lehmannii* but it seems to grow only in the Andes in Ecuador and Colombia. In Ecuador, it is fairly frequent in the provinces of Azuay, Bolívar, Cañar and Imbabura and common in Pichincha. According to Calaway Dodson, it grows as an epiphyte on small trees and also terrestrially on escarpment slopes. It occurs in humid forest, at altitudes between 1,300 and 2,800–3,000m.

This agrees with the orchid hunter Clarence Horich's (1930–1994) account of his adventures in Ecuador in 1955. He was looking for the famous *Maxillaria grandiflora*, but in fact what he collected was *Maxillaria lehmannii*. 'Somewhere in the western cordillera of the province of Cotopaxi there grows one of the most beautiful ►



The perfume  
is pleasant and  
fruity, evoking  
peach, apricot,  
then plum as  
the bloom ages



Watercolour of the  
author's plant of  
*Maxillaria lehmannyi*.  
By Gilles Bosquet

Maxillarias in existence: 3 to 4-inch flowers of pure, snowy white with a morade striped lip terminating in a golden yellow tip, by the dozens! Deep, shady canyons and river gorges are its home, which appears to be restricted to an altitude of from 1,200 to 1,500 metres. Constantly the cloud fog brushes heavily through these ravines, where the roaring river way below cuts violently through the thickets of thirty-foot tall *Equisetum giganteum* and through bamboo – a cool, utterly wet region of the cloud forest range. The walls of the canyon descend vertically, giving only precarious hold to the moss-coated trees, which rise to a height of over seventy-five feet. Here our *Maxillaria grandiflora* [sic] occurs in small quantities of, however, huge clusters on the highest branches, usually accompanied by *Pleurothallis*, *Odontoglossum*... rare *Epidendrum*, *Anthurium* and a multitude of ferns, lianas, begonias and selaginellas. Collecting this flora gem ...is one of the most dangerous tasks conceivable.'

Dodson, in addition, tells us that in its country of origin, *M. lehmannyi* flowers between May and July and that the flowers are pollinated by bees of the genera *Eulaema* and *Bombus*.

### Brief description

*Maxillaria lehmannii* is one of the largest species in the genus with plants on average 35–40cm tall. Old plants can form huge clumps producing large (8cm wide), beautiful, scented flowers. The sepals are ivory-white and the petals ivory-white bordered with pink. The lip is particularly striking: it is yellowish, strongly veined with violet-purple around the side lobes; while the mid-lobe is golden yellow with the margins undulate and crisped. The callus is very prominent and is thickly covered with yellow pseudo-pollen, which turns brown as the flower ages.

Although the species is so distinctive, it is often confused with *Maxillaria grandiflora*. The flowers of the latter are completely white, except for rose-purple margins on the lip and some dots of the same colour on the inner face of the column. The sepals and petals of *M. grandiflora* are 2.5cm long and the lip a little over 1cm long, but *M. lehmannii* has sepals 5.5cm long, petals slightly over 4cm long and a lip over 3cm. So the two species are easily distinguished. In spite of that, confusion remains; many plants sold as *M. grandiflora* are in fact *M. lehmannii* and, in the literature, *M. lehmannii* is often wrongly given as a synonym of *M. grandiflora*.

The scent of this maxillaria is remarkable; it is so strong that it can be detected from some distance and persists throughout the day and night, although it is most pronounced in the early morning. The perfume is pleasant and fruity, at first reminiscent of peach and apricot, then of plum as the flower ages. Even dried flowers retain scent for some days.

### Cultivation

*Maxillaria lehmannii* requires a lot of water. The most suitable compost is a mixture of two parts sphagnum to one part fine pine bark. Temperatures



A well-flowered plant of *Maxillaria lehmannii*

should be 12–15°C at night and 17–20°C during the day. Like other members of the *M. grandiflora* alliance, *M. lehmannii* can withstand occasional high summer temperatures in, but not more than 30°C.

Shade and good ventilation are essential. Plants should be watered two or three times a week (even soaked if necessary) and frequent spraying in summer leads to rapid growth. A well-established plant can produce 20 flowers at a time. The flowering season is spring, March to June depending on the year, and continues for five or six weeks. It is an easily grown species that is little affected by

disease or pests, except for mealybug.

I consider *Maxillaria lehmannii* to be one of the most beautiful species in the genus. The large, long-lasting white flowers with a yellow and purple lip and a delicious perfume make it highly desirable for any collection. ■

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